



## PROMOTING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE SOME INNOVATIONS

— ANANT PAI\*

Strictly speaking, promotion and marketing is not within my area of specialisation. As most of you are aware, my work has been in the area of using the comic technique to communicate with children. Through *Amar Chitra Katha*, I have tried to communicate our history and culture. Through *Tinkle*, I have tried to communicate even science, nature, geography etc. Through my comic strips in newspapers like *Fact Fantasy*, *Funland*, *Fun-time*, *Ramu and Shamu*, *Kapish* etc., I have tried to entertain and at times educate my young readers.

When *Amar Chitra Katha* series was launched in 1967, the response was very

poor. What is the use of producing something good, unless it is read widely, I thought. That is how I got involved with promotion and marketing. To teach Johnny arithmetic, it is said, you must know Johnny, you must know arithmetic and you must know how to teach. To promote books among children, you must love children, you must love books and you must know how to promote books among children. I love children and I love books. Therefore I thought I could learn how to inculcate the love of books in children by trial and error.

Whenever I have been asked reasons about the little success I have had in the

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*\*Anant Pai is the creator of the Amar Chitra Katha Series: He has shown what initiative and drive can achieve in marketing. Amar Chitra Katha sold less than 20,000 copies in the first years, but went on to sell 3.5 million copies annually. Tinkle, which he edits is another popular magazine. A graduate in chemical engineering he first joined in Times of India. But recognising the need to present Indian theme and values to children, he left to join India Book House at Bombay and wrote the story of Lord Krishna. It was the beginning of the tremendously successful Amar Chitra Katha Comics series and Fan Clubs for Pai all over the country.*



field of children's books, I have always said that it is in a large measure because even now I know what it is to think and feel like a child. Because I love children, I can easily identify with them. Even when prospective authors ask for my suggestions before writing scripts, I tell him, "When your child or a neighbour's child is all set to go out and play, stop him and try to tell him the story which you have written for *Amar Chitra Katha*. If you can hold his attention and read out the whole story to him, you may immediately bring the script to me."

Often, when the script-writers read out a script to me, I would comment, "I do not understand." The script-writers would be quite surprised at this comment. I would then hasten to add, I mean a child of nine does not understand this."

I have said all this as a preamble, as it were, to explain my view point that anyone who wants to excel in promoting children's books must love children and love books. If he has these, he could go for training in the field of marketing or he could learn promotion techniques, on the job itself.

### Marketing Twenty Years Ago

Twenty years ago, children were not the target age group for any sales promotion activity. Now, of course, as it is so obvious from the T.V. advertisements appearing every day, artfully designed to tug at the little heart-strings of children, it seems there is recognition of the persuasive power of the child in the purchase of the commodities. But more than 20 years ago when *Amar Chitra Katha* was started, the parents and teachers played a far more vital role in the purchase of books than today. I recall an incident that took place about 15 years ago which had thrilled me. I was walking along the footpath of Warden Road. Across the street on the other side

was a book shop in the show-window of which *Amar Chitra Katha* had been displayed.

A small child of about 5, pointed at one of the books and said something. Across that wide street I could not hear a word. It was like a pantomime. The mother said something to the child, held her by the hand and walked ahead. The child ran back to the shop and again pointed to the book. The mother opened her purse and said something. She then closed the purse and wanted to go ahead but the child would not budge from the place and the mother had to yield. It warmed my heart and I would have very much liked to know the exact words of that child.

Such examples, however, were exceptions to the rule that the parents decided what was good for children. Partly since I had chosen the medium of comics, there was some resistance from both parents and school authorities. The arguments against comics ranged from spoiling the language of children and exposing them to violence to disturbing them from their studies and deterring them from reading good literature. In fact, all that is being said today about the impact of T.V. on young minds, was said at that time about the evil influence of comics. Slowly, the readership of *Amar Chitra Katha* increased. The fact that parents and teachers frowned upon comics made them all the more appealing to young minds. Even Kapil Dev, the cricket star, mentioned to the manager of the Chandigarh office of India Book House that he had read *Amar Chitra Kathas* tucked in between pages of his textbooks.

### To Make Them Acceptable

To make *Amar Chitra Kathas* acceptable to the teaching community, we avoid the use of slang. Though violence could not be avoided in stories of Indian mythology, we



try to tone down scenes of violence. Moreover, I see no point in presenting a totally unrealistic picture of life to the young ones. After all, they have to be prepared to face life and hold their own against the odds, when they grow up.

To overcome the opposition to comics, in February 1978, an experiment was conducted with help of 961 students from 31 schools of New Delhi. In each school, one division was taught a history lesson from the textbook and the other group was taught the same history lesson with the help of an *Amar Chitra Katha* title on the subject. The results were tabulated and forwarded not only to the schools that participated in the experiment, but they were also presented at a seminar on *The Role of comics in School Education*, which was chaired by the then commissioner of *Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan* and inaugurated by the then Union Minister of Education, Dr. Pratap Chandra Chunder. Eminent educationists including some from the N.C.E.R.T., participated in the Seminar. This softened the opposition to comics.

### Promotion Techniques

We began holding quiz contests for children based on Indian mythology, history and legend. I have conducted over 190 quiz contests based on *Amar Chitra Katha* in leading cities of India from Srinagar to Trivandrum and from Gauhati in the East to Jaipur and Jodhpur in the West, the recent ones being the one I conducted in Bombay on October 8, the one conducted in Pune on November 9 and the one I conducted at Sapru House, New Delhi on November 15, 1989. To enhance the acceptability of *Amar Chitra Katha*, we hold two to three functions every year to release important *Amar Chitra Katha* titles. Such functions have been held in major cities of India and they have been graced by eminent persons of the land including the

President of India, ministers in the union cabinet, educationists, governors, and even religious luminaries like Cardinal Simon Pimenta and Swami Chinmayananda.

To coincide with the release of titles based on the life of poet-singers, even singing contests have been held. In addition, fancy dress competitions, role-playing contests, elocution contests, garden rallies and even inter-school one-act play contests have been held in many places.

In the *Heritage of India Contest* held by us, schools in Bombay vied with one another in re-enacting events from Indian History. Some of these exhibits had been prepared in such detail that the students must have worked on them for days on end. These activities help children to identify with our product and builds reader-loyalty.

*Immortal Moments, Immortal Words* is a contest in which we supply about 50 choice quotations from Indian history. These are delivered from the stage by the participants. In places like Pune and Bangalore, I have seen adults being moved to tears after witnessing performances by youngsters in this contest.

### A popular Contest

Story-telling contests, role-playing contests, and even fancy dress competitions call for preparations both on the part of organisers and participants, but the one contest which does not call for any preparations either on our part, or on the part of the participants is the mask-colouring contest. In this we provide large-size pictures in black and white, of the faces of heroes and heroines from Indian mythology and history. Youngsters have to colour them, paste them onto a hard-board, punch holes in the area marked for eyes and tie a string. The participants not only get the mask, but also a copy of *Amar*



*Chitra Katha*. There are cash prizes for good entries.

I got the inspiration to conduct these contests from the famous Shankar's Painting Contests, conducted by the Children's Book Trust.

Our representatives would visit schools and find it easy to conduct mask-colouring contests, in any one of the classes. Sometimes, the teacher would be absent and providing a substitute teacher would be a problem to the principal. So schools welcome mask-colouring contests in substitution periods.

The cardinal rule that we followed while conducting our contests was that every child who participates should get a prize. In our quiz contests, every participant gets a prize even when he does not answer a single question. The winners of course get substantial prizes.

### Certificates as Incentives

Whatever contests we hold, we make it a point to issue certificates to the children who receive prizes. Children preserve them and often show them to friends and relatives, which means promotion for our publications.

Another sales promotion idea, which we had tried in the early years of *Amar Chitra Katha* was to print coupons on one of the pages and twelve such coupons could be exchanged for a copy of an *Echo Book*.

### Sales Improve

I recall, the distributors of *Tinkle* in Pune, M/s Dixit & Co., informing me that the sales of *Tinkle* had improved by 50 per cent within two months, after the quiz contest on science and nature, based on *Tinkle* had been held there.

### Subtle Sales Promotion

We take care to reply to every letter re-

ceived from children. We feel this helps to build reader-loyalty to our magazines. As a matter of fact, we do spend quite some money on replying to letters. I have been able to get the approval of the directors for this expenditure on the grounds that this is subtle sales promotion.

Also to satisfy the youngsters' craving for recognition and to help build their confidence, we rewrite the stories and jokes sent by them and print them, often along with their photographs. Of course, there are limitations to the number of entries that we can publish in *Tinkle*. Therefore, we have a magazine titled *Amar Vikas* in which we print jokes, riddles and do-it-yourself ideas sent by readers.

Subscribers are asked for their birthdates and they are sent birthday presents. This means a lot to a young child. The child feels thrilled that someone is remembering him. We also give children stickers and book labels containing pictures of characters from *Tinkle*. These gestures make an impact on the parents too. I receive lots of calls from children straightaway announcing their names e.g., "Uncle Pai, this is Preeti," and they try to give some information about themselves, how many marks they have got in the examination etc. Often in a shop or even on the street, I am accosted with words like "I am Mr. so and so, father of Deepa." Then I have to sometimes pretend that the name rings a bell. Sometimes it does ring a bell.

### Amar-Tinkle Clubs

We have helped in the formation of over 400 Amar-Tinkle-Clubs in India. We guide the activities of these clubs. We also send them badges, certificates and letter heads, which in turn, help in improving the goodwill for our publications.

**Meeting with Teachers and Principals**  
Since teachers and educationists still



play an important role in influencing the minds of youngsters, wherever I go, I usually hold a meeting with principals and leading educationists. I have learnt much from the exchange of information that usually takes place at such meetings. In addition, these meetings have helped to improve the acceptability of our *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Tinkle* in schools. This led us to the campaign a few years ago with the copy "*Comics are now welcome in schools, but only Amar Chitra Katha.*"

With the increasing popularity of *Amar Chitra Katha*, many others entered the field. The word *chitra katha* and *chitra patti*, which I had coined for comics and comic strips respectively, are today used like generic words. Since, from the business point of view, there was need for us to ward off the onslaught of competitors, we promoted *Amar Chitra Katha* in the market with the following slogans.

*Amar Chitra Kathas* "the most authentic source" and "*Amar Chitra Katha* are written by people who care for children."

We also ran advertisements emphasising the logo of *Amar Chitra Katha*.

### Autograph Sessions with Authors

Autograph sessions with authors are not very successful in the case of children's books. The only occasion, when we had some appreciable sale of a book was when we had arranged a programme, as a part of which, the author Partap Sharma had brought his dog Ranjha, which performed on the stage and in the auditorium. The roars of appreciation from audience conveyed that the programme was a success, and quite a few copies of *Dog Detective Ranjha* had been sold on the occasion.

### Book Fairs

That book fairs and exhibitions help improve sales is a well-known fact, though the sales at a book fair or exhibition are

not always cost-effective. They help spread the awareness, which in the long run, improves sales. It has been our experience that participation in World Book Fairs, has rarely been cost-effective.

In Calcutta, children are encouraged to save money to be able to purchase books during Durga Puja, Saraswati Puja and occasions like the Calcutta Book Fair. Perhaps, this explains the fact that participation in Calcutta Book Fair is cost-effective, even to the publishers of children's books. Even regional book fairs like Bombay Book Fair are often cost effective.

### Display contests

We have arranged display contests of books not only at book shops but even at hotels, restaurants and petrol pumps, when we had major campaigns in Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta.

### Poompata and Balarama

It is likely that I am unaware of some successful promotional ideas, used by publishers in the North. With this rider, I would like to state that I have been highly impressed by some sales promotion techniques used by the publishers of *Poompata* and *Balarama*. Shri Mohanan, the editor of *Balarama* (formerly editor of *Poompata*) perhaps should get the credit for the ideas and the publishers M/s Par & Co. and M.M. Publications, publishers of *Poompata* and *Balarama* respectively, deserve fulsome praise for putting them into effect with success. *Poompata* has held children's rallies at which contests are held and prizes are given. I had the pleasure of attending three such rallies and was quite impressed by the response and the arrangements.

*Poompata* has used plastic toys, cuddling toys and T-shirts to promote their magazine. Thousands of such T-shirts have been sold.



Balarama had recently held children's rallies, simultaneously in almost all leading towns of Kerala to conduct colouring contests. It was quite a success. It was estimated that over a lakh had participated in these rallies.

### Innovative Ideas Used by Marathi Bal Kumar Sahitya Sammelan

Marathi Bal Kumar Sahitya Sammelan has to its credit a few innovative ideas for the sales of children's books. At their annual conferences, writers tell stories and recite poems to entertain children who flock in thousands. Plays and skits are also staged and of course children's books are displayed and sold. Shri Sudhakar Prabhu, Smt. Leelawati Bhagwat, Shri Shridhar Rajguru and others associated with this organisation had conceived a novel idea a few years ago to promote books.

In Maharashtra, the day following the birth of Krishna (Janmashtami) is celebrated with gay abandon by hordes of boys and young men roaming the streets, across which from ropes, tied high, are kept earthen pots. These pots are supposed to represent curds and butter, of which Krishna was very fond.

These days the pots contain money. Youngsters form human pyramids to reach the pot and claim the prize. Marathi Bal Kumar Sahitya Sammelan kept books instead of cash money, as prizes tied to these ropes. This idea caught on. Similarly, Treasure Hunts have been organised in Pune in which books are kept as treasure and the children have to hunt and find them. Finders are of course, keepers. This helps to develop love of books in a very subliminal way.

For a number of years, another organisation of Pune. Shishu Ranjan, has been conducting garden rallies during the summer vacation in the four major parks of Pune. A platform, a few tables and a mike are

arranged. Children visiting the parks flock around the tables. They are then made to recite poems, tell stories etc. Prizes are given to the participants. *Amar Chitra Katha* has sponsored some of these activities in addition to the inter-school drama festivals, arranged by them. Along with garden rallies, book exhibitions are also held to promote the love and sale of children's books.

Marathi Bal Kumar Sahitya Sammelan had taken a project in hand to build a home library movement and enrol one lakh children as members. The Sammelan did enrol a few thousand members and did make available some books but the project was not a great success.

### Granthali Book Reading Movement

Granthali, an organisation of mostly book-lovers, writers, journalists and illustrators established in 1975, in Bombay, has been spearheading the movement of popularising reading habits. In 1982, vans containing books toured Ratnagiri, Kolhapur and many other towns in Maharashtra for 18 days, exhibiting and selling books. In these tours, 45 speakers, it is said, had participated. There were programmes of story-telling and singing, as well as demonstrations in drawing by a leading cartoonist of Bombay. In December 1983, Granthali had organised a door-to-door campaign in 18 co-operative housing societies in and around Bombay.

In June 1984, along with the book exhibition, talks of the famous Marathi writer and playwright, Mr. Vijay Tendulkar had been organised. In December 1986, during the Christmas vacation, book exhibitions were held simultaneously in 50 different towns of Maharashtra. In December 1987, *Bal Zumbad* had been organised at Shivaji Park, Bombay, in which not only books but science exhibits also had been displayed. Leading illustrators and cartoonists as



well writers of children's literature attended this fair and mixed freely with children and signed autographs. The cultural shows had also been arranged and these attracted large crowds of children. It must be said, however, that some of these activities of Granthali were made possible because of donations including one of Rs. 7,50,000 from Ford Foundation.

### Libraries

Libraries help develop book-reading habits and this is why the AWIC has done quite some work to promote children's library movement, at least in Delhi.

During summer vacations, I have arranged mini libraries, often simultaneously, in many areas of Bombay. I have an advantage in arranging mini libraries, because I run the Partha Institute of Personality Development for teenagers. Mini libraries are conducted for three to four days at each centre, to help the teenagers develop their personality and to provide work experience to them. These are managed entirely by students. Because of my association with

the India Book House, in such mini-libraries, usually only IBH books are kept.

Youngsters also display and sell books on these occasions. They earn 10% of the retail value of the sale or Rs. 15 per day (for three hours a day), whichever is higher. In May 1989, India Book House, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and Partha Institute collaborated and conducted book bazars at 22 centres all over Bombay.

### Conclusion

The success story of *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Tinkle* bear adequate testimony to the fact that the unconventional methods of promotion do yield results, even in a country like India where the common man has yet to realise the importance of inculcating the love of books in his children.

Much remains to be done. Right now, the challenge of the visual medium, the video and Doordarshan, is formidable. I do hope that at this seminar, ideas are discussed to meet this challenge and to retain the effectiveness of the print medium.

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dition of written literature for children, and help in its promotion. Since then, there has been a palpable change in social attitudes towards children's literature and their practitioners. Organisations such as the AWIC have contributed a great deal towards this change. The situation today is

far more optimistic. More and more people are realising the value of good books for children and are willing to acknowledge that writing for children is a specialised, difficult task. But we have a long way to go yet. Let us do our bit to keep this wheel of change rolling by writing more and better books for children.